

**Muslim Religious Institutions in Imperial Russia.
The Islamic World of the Novouzensk District and
the Kazakh Inner Horde, 1780-1910. Leiden - Boston
- Köln, Brill, 2001 (Islamic History and Civilization,
35), x-341 p.**

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- 1 The last two decades of the 20th century witnessed an important shift in Russian studies from the centre to the peripheries. Historical research focussed on local societies, Russian and even more so non-Russian. Due to the lack of indigenous sources or inadequate knowledge of minority languages, a good portion of recent research, however, continued to rely primarily on Russian sources. The historiographical boom in ethnic and national studies thus did not always contribute to a critical reappraisal of either pre-revolutionary, Soviet or nationalist historical myths. This is particularly true for the study of Muslim communities, as the Islamic past was interpreted rather hostile by late Imperial witnesses (in the majority Orthodox missionaries), Soviet atheists and ethnocentric national intellectuals alike. Only very recently a re-examination of the huge corpus of Islamic literature produced and published in Imperial Russia has begun. Allen Frank's first monography on *Islamic historiography and 'Bulghar' Identity among the Tatars and Bashkirs of Russia* (1998) was an important contribution to the reappraisal of the Islamic discourse within the confines of the Empire.
- 2 Frank's approach in *Muslim Religious Institutions* is very much comparable to the one he made good use of in *Islamic historiography*: Sound philological skills are applied for a scrupulous investigation of one major and representative Turkic language source. The

analysis is embedded in an extremely wide reading of relevant literature (cf. bibliography!) and results in a comprehensive representation of the formerly dismissed intellectual world of Russia's *ulama*. Some twenty Tatar village histories from the late 19th and early 20th century that came down to us as manuscripts or in printed form, and Allen Frank this time chose a manuscript written by two local imams in the Tatar village of Alty Ata, situated on the verge of the open steppes on the Lower Volga. Generally speaking, Tatar village histories display features both of traditional Islamic historiography and of Russian *kraevedenie*. Frank aptly shows that they have been unduly ignored so far, since they contain important information on the inner life of Russian Muslim minority communes, as well as their communication with neighbouring non-Muslim groups and the Russian State. What renders the *Tawarikh-i Alti Ata* even more interesting than other works of the genre is the fact that it reflects the complex ethnic mosaic of the Steppe frontier in Saratov's Novouzensk district. The authors included Tatar, Bashkir, Kazakh and Muslim Ural Cossacks into their narrative.

- 3 Frank's work is not a critical edition of the manuscript, however. Only some 20 pages refer to regional Islamic historiography, the manuscript and the authors. Instead, the author chose a topical approach, which means that each chapter is devoted to a certain problem, cites the relevant passages from the manuscript and correlates them to other primary and secondary sources. One chapter respectively is dealing with the geographical and economical setting, the ethnic composition of the population and their interactions, the Islamic *ulama*, the mosques, the educational system, and the Islamic rituals. Concerning local economy and the role of mosques and schools the narrative of the *Tawarikh-i Alti Ata* largely coincides with recent research conducted on the basis of Russian archival and published sources. In accordance with them Frank refutes Tatar and Bashkir national myths about a reportedly overwhelming success of *jadid* (reformed) *maktabs* and *madrasas* in pre-revolutionary Russia. Some ten pages devoted to the problem of *waqfs* and found-raising stand out, since these questions have traditionally been passed over in silence. While the term *waqf* is used in indigenous and Russian sources, the financing of Islamic institutions in European Russia differed substantially from traditional Islamic patterns. Russia's laws did foresee tax exempt communal funds, and the maintenance of mosques and schools depended either on the support of a one or a few wealthy supporters or on contributions of the whole community. Both forms were organised rather informal and could cease over time. Added to that, the *Tawarikh-i Alti Ata* is quite outspoken on occasional conflicts emerging between local elites, seeking to raise their prestige and influence within the *mahalla*, and the rank-and-file members of the communities, who tried to evade financial burdens without being completely overruled by some rich donors.
- 4 Frank's source-based account of religious figures, their origins, their education, and their role within the communities is certainly the most exhaustive published account on this equally neglected subject. Again, it challenges both of pre-revolutionary *jadid* and Soviet stereotypes depicting Islam and the *ulema* either as an overwhelmingly traditionalist and fanatic force, or as being a servile instrument of the village bourgeoisie. The final chapter discusses Islamic institutions and the problem of «Islamisation» of the Kazakh Inner Horde. Reaching out far beyond the realm of village history, Frank re-reading of relevant sources dismisses common assumptions that the Kazakhs had only been superficially islamised before a State sponsored

« mission » by Tatar *ulama* took place in the late 18th and the first half of the 19th century.

- 5 Frank's thematic manual therefore should be a must for any student of the history of Islam in Russia. Historians not specialised on Muslim peoples might benefit from the book likewise. The chapter on ethnic groups and interethnic relations does not merely reveal the complex interplay of ethnic, social and confessional factors defining the self and mutual perceptions in polyethnic areas. Added to this, it reveals the fundamental impact Imperial rule had on the reformation of ethnic, social and confessional boundaries among non-Russian people, particularly among diaspora groups on the fringe of or outside their historical territories.
- 6 Criticism, if any? Challenging many stereotypes and errors, Frank very overtly engages in polemics with other historians of Russia's Islamic history. In doing so, he sometimes seems to reduce the value of his work to a mere disprove of historiographical ballast. *Muslim Religious Institutions* it worth much more than this, and one sometimes wishes that Frank would have shown more confidence in the reader's ability to credit both the importance and the evidence of the source as well as the soundness and consequences of his own interpretations.

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Thèmes : 13.3. Asie centrale

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